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ABSTRACT

This issue of "The Leaflet" focuses on the black experience. Included are four poems by Lawrence Johnson, "Little Girl Black," "Be's That Way Sometime," "My Blackness," and "Three Songs of Freedom"; two papers originally presented at the 1973 New England Association of Teachers of English Conference, "Teaching English to the Disadvantaged in Large Urban Centers" by Jessie Wright and "Black Experience, Black Literature, Black Students, and the English Classroom" by Darwin T. Turner; and reviews of eight books by Paul Janeczko, Lawrence Johnson, and Lee E. Allen. (JM)

December 1974

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THE NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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The Black Experience

the leaflet

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Vol. LXXIII, No. 3

THE EDITOR'S PAGE

White and Black alike are discovering the invisible art of the Black Experience, always there, but rarely seen. Filled with the intense emotions of joy and pain, the Black Experience takes on universal meaning. *The Leaflet* has attempted to convey this experience through two extraordinary talks given a year ago at the NEATE Conference in Kennebunkport, by Jesse Wright and Darwin Turner, and through the poetry of Lawrence Johnson and the drawings of Linda Allen, as well as reviews of eight books by Paul Janeczko, Lawrence Johnson and myself.

The next issue of *The Leaflet* will focus upon composition.

Drawings by Linda Allen, portrait artist from Duxbury, Mass.

THE LEAFLET

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Editor
LEE E. ALLEN

Managing Editor
ROBERT L. GOODMAN

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LITTLE GIRL BLACK

Little girl Black,
Sitting on the steps
Waiting for your
Prince to come.
Didn't anyone tell you?
They done shot your
Black and shining Prince.
Why are you still
Sitting there waiting?
Little girl Black,
Sitting and looking
At her image in a
Mirror of piss.
Waiting, waiting,
Waiting to be loved.
Get up little girl
And look into
My mirror eyes
And see that
You are Black,
And so beautiful.

Lawrence Johnson teaches reading and The Black Experience at Needham High School.

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TEACHING ENGLISH TO THE DISADVANTAGED IN LARGE URBAN CENTERS

by Jessie Wright

I am glad to have been asked to talk with you on the subject of English for the disadvantaged in large urban centers. I recognize the term "disadvantaged" as a euphemism for blacks and other minorities — Puerto Ricans, American Indians, Chicanos — to whom our large cities have been automatically turned over by the suburban exodus of middle-class whites and not a few middle-class blacks as well.

I taught in one of these rapidly changing areas, following the edict of 1954, over a span of years from 1958-1965. For the next seven years, after a year's study in Humanities as a John Hay Fellow at the University of Chicago, I taught on the periphery of the inner city in well-heeled Georgetown, where many of the middle and upper middle-class whites had dug in, determined to hold the bastion against possible encroachment from "east of the Park" — the dividing city line. My experience in these two areas accounts in large measure for my connotation of "disadvantaged," which is somewhat different from the popular conception, born as it seems of a varied mixture of belief in white superiority, of the scare literature of the social scientist, aided by some contrived statistics of educational theorists, and of a determination on the part of reactionaries to prove that school integration was a national mistake.

Let me cite two episodes to clarify what I mean by "disadvantaged."

In the summer of 1963 I took a course in communications at the University of Rhode Island. At lunch one day I was joined by a white woman, a summer student in reading. She told me that after several years of teaching in the public schools of New York City, she had asked to be transferred to Harlem. "I had a Mother's Day meeting with the parents of my first-graders," she said, "and do you know, they love their children?" This last was said in great surprise. I was as shocked at her ignorance as she was at her discovery. As a second instance: in the first year of my Humanities program at Western High School in Georgetown, a black student whose home was in ghetto Washington — who, by the way, was graduated last June from Radcliffe with honors — said to me one day, "Mrs. Wright, do you know that before I came here I thought all white students were smart?"

Here, then, are terms seldom noted in a proximately accurate definition of "disadvantaged" — the absence of perspective initially accruing to both teacher and student by reason of limited social exposure.

If we look at the terms and the situations generally conjured up when we say "disadvantaged," we can see that we are talking about the poor and not about any ethnic group. The ills of our society erupting in alienation, uncertainty, rejection, family disintegration and providing an escape for our defeated, disillusioned, and depressed young in drugs, suicide, or the Jesus movement — these are not to be found localized among minorities or in the slums. When, it may be significantly asked, did educators do an about-face and begin to blame the victims of poor schools, poor neighborhoods, poor parents for their inability to read or cipher? We have always had the poor, and in the good old American tradition have lauded our democracy, which sings sagas to the President who learned his history in a backless cabin by candlelight, and the statesman who left school in the third grade but who through reading and listening and writing became one of the framers and signers of the Constitution, and to the slave-turned-national-orator, revered and feared abolitionist, who learned to read by beguiling his young master into teaching him his letters. Yes, the poor we have had with us always, but we teachers act as if he were some monster discovered ten years ago. The attitudes we have built up toward him have had much to do with the wonder disappearing from him by the time he reached the third grade and the boredom of school routine so encompassing him afterward that he taps out time impatiently, looking forward to the first chance to drop out.

It is no rare thing now in our cities for senior high schools to have on their rosters seniors with reading levels at the second or third grade. Such a condition reflects crucially a change in our professional thinking. We have abdicated our role as teachers and become social workers, a profession for which we have no training and no skills. Concerned with the "hurt feelings" Johnny would sustain if he is held back in the primary grades because he can't read, we have passed him on with his age group right on up to the senior year. From there, if he is still with us, we have put a robe on his back and a diploma in his hand, although, as a former president of the D.C. School Board stated, he cannot read the words written on it — another "functional illiterate" turned out to pasture.

Today's teacher has moved far from the drill on "E on the end makes the I say I" to the multiplicity of technological aids to reading, to say nothing of recent structures like the Open School. Certainly she has some answers for the reading deficiencies of some of our ghetto children, answers more acceptable and objective than the stubborn fact of poverty. I submit that, in spite of all aids, the root word in teaching is "teach" and the magical instrument which guarantees learning is still the teacher.

With the ghetto child who has acquired some knowledge of reading and

writing we do little more. Condescending in our maudlin patronage, we nurture an image of him as victimized by a broken home, a history of defeat and failures. Then frustrated missionaries with a pseudo-Messianic impulse, we set ourselves to give him a new image, one free from failures or defeats. We require no home assignments, allow him to do all his reading or be read to in class, and surfeit him with films, records, games. If he deigns to put anything down on paper, we gush extravagantly over the most trivial performance and accept his work in any form — in pencil; red, blue or green ink; on torn sheets of paper, replete with scratches and smudges. If he attends class every day, he gets an "A"; if he shows up the last week before grade time, he gets at least a passing grade. He hasn't failed, but he is not fooled. A girl from one of the hard-core schools made this statement to a news reporter: "Teachers don't care. They never give us any homework and give us 'A,s' and 'B,s' for doing nothing." This is almost a verbatim quotation from a story that appeared in the Washington *Post* relative to an investigation of a student turmoil. The black teacher has not been moved because a third-rate education has been foisted upon the ghetto student. In many instances she has welcomed the release from rigorous learning and teaching and is among the first to raise a cry at any suggestion of teacher evaluation or accountability. The fact that teacher strikes in Washington, Philadelphia, New York, and Detroit closed the door of learning chiefly against the minorities, already suffering from inadequate schooling, had little weight among many blacks whose cry for more money and smaller classes reinforced the general hue, drowning out all other considerations.

To turn now to another matter — a most deplorable situation, fostered to a degree by black politics, to an equal degree by sheer bigotry, and perhaps to an even greater degree by teacher frustration. This situation threatens to lower the horizons of the entire black student population and further polarize racial groups. I refer to what some have tried to dignify by the names "ghettoese," "bi-dialecticism," "black English." Not only are we saying to Appalachia, the black, the Chicano, the Puerto Rican that the untutored speech of his poor is standard for him — quaint and quite adequate; that to try to learn the standard speech of American business, Government, the professions, and the arts is to deny his culture, insult his parentage and to adopt "white English." We have done a good job of selling to one part of the student population, "Accept yourself; be at home in your community." And to another part, "Improve yourself; for you there are no limits — the world is yours!"

Many of the senior high school students in our large urban centers — especially those from low-income environments — are the first in their

families to reach this level of schooling. You will find behind them hard-working, sacrificing mothers and fathers, eager for their child to have the chance they missed. Don't you ever believe that these parents are offended when their child uses cultivated speech at home or when he addresses a group at a church. They don't read his papers, perhaps, or pay much attention to his grades; but they certainly wear a broad grin as the unfamiliar words trip off his tongue. The unschooled parents are looking for a dramatic transformation in their schooled progeny. One cannot overestimate the high price they put on education as the only hope for upward mobility and the great difference they expect it to make in and for their sons and daughters. May I caut'on the new teachers not to be too quick to buy these fictions about black parents and their psyche, though these fictions come clothed in erudite terms from men in high positions. Often the only poor black they know is the maid in their homes, and she knows almost intuitively to say what her employer would like to hear. She has not read, nor could she read, *Invisible Man;* but she has grown up with the admonition of the protagonist's grandfather's dying words to his family and has adopted them literally: "Son, I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swallow you till they vomit or bust wide open." Years before boundaries were re-drawn to effect a greater degree of integration at the almost all-white schools in Georgetown, I attended a Parents' Bake Sale at the junior high school in which my sons were enrolled. I was struck by the sight of a thirtyish black woman who stood apart from the crowd, looking self-consciously ill-at-ease. I approached her to ask if she were connected in any way with the school. In very broken speech she gave me to understand that she was a parent and had recently come from down South. "I have moved six times," she said, "to keep my daughter in a good school. When she finishes here, I am ready to move again if I have to." Her method of moving, as she explained, was to get herself hired in a live-in position in a preferred neighborhood.

As educators, let us not try to accommodate ourselves and our teaching to the lowest conditions in an environment. Let us try to identify with the hopes, the ambitions of these parents and exert ourselves to the utmost to prepare our students for participation in what our own finest experiences and their own television conceptions, at least, have indicated as the good life.

What can we as classroom teachers do now about the situation we are in — whether it is of our own making, of our own choice, or by the arbitrary decision of an administrator. Let me suggest for one thing that we do not overdo sentimentality. I doubt that the youngster, if in high school, wants it, needs it, or trusts it. He may be a real somebody on his block, for all his

"disadvantage." He may be the best-dressed (by whatever standards), the best student, the best talker, the best fighter, the best athlete — a real somebody. We see him in his down-trodden environment and respond against the background of our own experience. He has no sense of being culturally deprived. His television brings him all the art, color, drama, documentaries that it brings to suburbia. That he is lacking in many first-hand experiences is not to say that he has no knowledge of the world around him. Let us not talk down to him, flagrantly underestimating his intelligence.

As a second caveat, let us not fail to expect something of him. Show him that we do care. Keep him forever reaching just a little beyond his grasp. Don't sell him out to our preconceived estimate of the ghetto child as uneducable. Underexposed? Yes. That opens another opportunity for us: See that he gets to a concert hall, visits the museums, attends a play, experiences something of the distinctive culture of different groups. Broaden his exposures, multiply manyfold his opportunities for making choices and establishing values.

Further, let us accept him. Respect his humanness. See him with your inner vision. Look beyond his bush, his plaits, his bandannas, his sloe eyes, his Spanish accent, his mountain dialect. Do not stop at his race when you look at him, but speak to him. "Fist his mind in your hand." Above all, teach him.

In similar vein, let's give him an opportunity for exchange with students in private, suburban, or parochial schools. I have just completed such an arrangement with an eleventh grade class in Far Northeast — the hinterlands of Washington — and one at Holy Trinity, parish of the Kennedys, in the midst of the Georgetown University atmosphere. After the first exchange, October 17, with Woodson students at Holy Trinity where both groups had had a surprisingly lively exchange on Chaucer, these were some of the remarks: A Holy Trinity girl: "I was surprised to learn that you study some of the same things about Chaucer that we do." Another, a black Holy Trinity student: "I was afraid to present my skit at first, but it went over well." A girl from Woodson: "Oh, this is nice! I didn't think you'd be so friendly. I'll be glad when you visit us."

Both Tom Dever, the teacher from Woodson, and Sister Therese, were quite exhilerated by the exchange. The middle and upper-middle ethnic group at Holy Trinity (many embassies are represented in their student body) had a new look at a group of inner-city blacks from the public schools. The blacks present, all but two, had invaded for the very first time the fabled precincts of Old Georgetown. A slight brush for each but a highly instructive beginning.

You know and I know that intellectual ability is not confined to any socio-economic level. Insecurities and inferiorities strengthen themselves among groups or individuals that are in-grown. Let us strive to put an end to the disadvantage under which we labored during the course of our maturation by giving these young people a chance to know and to have meaningful interpersonal contacts; a chance to bury the stereotype of Japanese, Chinese, black, white, Jew, Indian, African — of rich and poor; a chance to pull off the badges that blind their eyes and to see in their two the real two.

Through teacher-student exchanges in literature we come so close to their minds, their feelings, and through their composition we touch their imagination, their creative self. We get to know each other so well that when they look at us inquiringly and with trust ask, "Teacher, Teacher?" We sense the sharp pain of joy and feel too a great humility. Ours is indeed a high calling, a sacred trust.

As custodians of the language it is up to us to preserve it in its purity and nurture it in its flowering that it may be the unifying bond of one people, flexible and sensitive enough to catch their deepest thought, their most fleeting moods and nebulous fancies. As teachers it is our responsibility so to teach this language to all of our students that each may comprehend and share fully with the other.

Edmund Farrell at the Secondary Section Conference at Cincinnati last April opened his talk on language with these words:

> Language in this society seems to be in a decadent stage. Whatever powers it once had for civilizing and humanizing have apparently fallen victim to the ravages of misuse.

We should not further that misuse by giving quiet assent to a barren vocabulary where "Like," "man," and "dude" must carry all shades of meaning and perform many linguistic stunts. Nor to a sentence pattern that relies heavily on body language to transmit any thought whatever.

In a mechanized, increasingly competitive society the English teacher should work for unity, not disparity. A common language will be a unifying link. I made this statement at the Minneapolis convention. I make it again here — not because it is novel, but because I am deeply concerned as I witness the dereliction of many of our teachers — black and white — as they settle for mediocrity and an easy calm. Shall we capitulate to expediency or shall we gladly learn and gladly teach?

BE'S THAT WAY SOMETIME

Someone said to me
The other day,
"Take your time, sister,
Take your time."
I wish I could
Take my time
But I ain't got much time left.
Been a workin'
And tryin' to keep
The faith a long,
Long time.
But there comes a spell,
When people grow tired.
Lord, I do believe
I done grown tired.
Like the young folks say,
"Be's that way sometime."
These ole bones of mine
Just won't take
Me no fu'ther.
Plum tuckered-out.
It wouldn't be
So bad if it were
Just my bones
That were tired,
But Lord, I finds
My mind done
Grown a little
Tired too.
I guess it be's
That way sometime,
When you're
Eighty-three.
Lord, it would feel
Righ' nice to set
Awhile with you,
All that and
Heaven too.
Some people are

A feared of dying.
Honey chile, what
Must be, will be.
Like the young folks say,
It be's that way sometime.
I'm eighty-three years old
And I ain't afraid of dying.
The way I see it
Dying can't be half
As bad as living
Day to day,
When you poor and
Black like me.

—Lawrence Johnson

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BLACK EXPERIENCE, BLACK LITERATURE, BLACK STUDENTS, AND THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by Darwin T. Turner

A generation ago, Frank Marshall Davis, a black poet, phrased the dilemma of a black writer:

You asked what happened to Roosevelt Smith
Well . . .
Conscience and the critics got him
Roosevelt Smith was the only dusky child born and bred in the village of Pine City, Nebraska
At college they worshipped the novelty of a black poet and predicted fame
At twenty-three he published his first book . . . the critics said he imitated Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay . . . they raved about a wealth of racial material and the charm of darky dialect
So for two years Roosevelt worked and observed in Dixie
At twenty-five a second book . . . Negroes complained about plantation scenes and said he dragged Aframerica's good name in the mire for gold . . . "Europe," they said, "honors Dunbar for his 'Ships that Pass in the Night' and not for his dialect which they don't understand"
For another two years Roosevelt strove for a different medium of expression
At twenty-seven a third book . . . The critics said the density of Gertrude Stein or T. S. Eliot hardly fitted the simple material to which a Negro had access
For another two years Roosevelt worked
At twenty-nine his fourth book . . . the critics said a Negro had no business imitating the classic forms of Keats, Browning and Shakespeare . . . "Roosevelt Smith," they announced, "has nothing original and is merely a blackface white. His African heritage is a rich source should he use it"
So for another two years Roosevelt went into the interior of Africa
At thirty-one his fifth book . . . interesting enough, the critics said, but since it followed nothing done by any white poet it was

probably just a new kind of prose

> Day after the reviews came out Roosevelt traded conscience and critics for the leather pouch and bunions of a mail carrier and read in the papers until his death how little the American Negro had contributed to his nation's literature . . . .[1]

Mr. Davis' personal experience attests the validity of his complaint. Although he published his books of poetry in the 1930's and 1940's, he was not discovered and anthologized until the 1960's when publishers and editors — responding to demands from students and educators — began to darken anthologies by including black writers.

A black who belabors this point is sometimes accused of demanding advantages for black writers. Herman Melville, the critics say, disappeared for almost sixty years before he was rediscovered. The fate of one or two writers, however, is not the issue. The issue, instead, is that, for the first sixty years of this century, editors and anthologies, trainers of English teachers, and, consequently, teachers themselves ignored all black writers except one or two. Paul Laurence Dunbar and Countee Cullen occasionally appeared, but scarcely another.

Without thinking, someone might insist that the neglect merely indicated that white educators assumed that white students would be interested primarily in materials about whites. Such reasoning might even seem to be supported by the arguments for black subjects for black students.

The reasoning sounds good but is false. The fact is that during the years of neglect of black writers, the black experience and black characters were quite popular as long as they were seen through the eyes of such whites as Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, DuBose Heyward, William Faulkner, and other whites who sympathetically or hostilely delineated black people from their own perspectives — for their own purposes.

Now, in the mid-1970's, scarcely a decade since black writers were admitted to integrated curricula to rap with black students who themselves had entered those classrooms less than a decade earlier — now, in the mid-1970's as American intellectuals, with their notoriously short attention span, turn to women's studies and ecology, the question arises again, "Is the black experience relevant for American students?" Why use black materials if all the students are white? Are black materials effective means of motivating black students? Do black materials educate students to awareness of the problems of the 1970's?

In the brief time I have to spend before you who are deliciously stuffed and soporifically housed this evening, I cannot analyze all questions

significant to these issues. Instead, I merely wish to raise a few matters with the hope that you will consider them as you return to your classrooms.

Call this talk, if you will, "Black Experience, Black Literature, Black Students, and the English Classroom." I do not intend to belabor the question of relevance. Ever since the term gained ascendancy in educational circles during the 1960's, I have suspected that "relevance" is not determined solely by the material itself but also by the manner in which the material is presented. For example, the enthusiasm which has caused some teachers to realize that black students will be interested in black subjects has caused others to imply that blacks are interested only in black subjects. Therefore, they insist, many of the materials affectionately taught in English classrooms are irrelevant to black students. Certainly, it is absurd for any teacher to present "Sir Patrick Spens" or "A Tale of Two Cities" — two works from my own high school days — as examples of the "human" experience while the same teacher never discusses any work in which blacks represent the human experience. Nevertheless, I insist that an imaginative teacher can create relevance. Who says that a play about two young Italian lovers is irrelevant to black students? Let the black student — and the whites — imagine that Juliet is a young daughter of Archie Bunker, Romeo is a teen-aged black who lives in the same neighborhood, and the Prince is a white policeman who has threatened to jail the families — the black males at least — if any further disturbance troubles the neighborhood. Now that's a story which could emerge from Southside Chicago, Detroit, or a number of other cities. Black authors themselves have worked with the theme of social pressures which tragically interfere with, separate, and destroy lovers from antagonistic cultures. (Bryant Rollins, a black novelist from Roxbury, Massachusetts, modified the theme and called his work *Danger Song*. Ernest Gaines, a black novelist from Louisiana, varied the theme and called it *Of Love and Dust*.)

If I insist that relevance for black students can be discovered in works written by white authors about white people for white readers, I must also insist that white readers can discover relevance in works by black authors and that a failure to discern such relevance evidences either the myopia or the racism of the reader. Let me illustrate with two poems from Gwendolyn Brooks. The first is "Kitchenette Building."

> We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
> Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
> Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder, But not Well! Not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.[2]

Knowledge that the poet is a black writing about scenes she has observed is interesting information, but surely the experience described can be appreciated and understood by white people as well as by blacks.

Perhaps an even more pertinent, though not as poetic, example is "The Ballad of Late Annie."

Late Annie in her bower lay,
Though sun was up and spinning.

The blush-brown shoulder was so bare,
Blush-brown lip was winning.

Out then shrieked the mother-dear,
"Be I to fetch and carry?
Get a broom to whish the doors
Or get a man to marry."

"Men there were and men there be
But never men so many
Chief enough to marry me,"
Thought the proud late Annie.

"Whom I raise my shades before
Must be gist and lacquer.
With melted opals for my milk,
Pearl-leaf for my cracker."[3]

The description of the day-dreaming heroine clearly identifies her as a black; yet is her story less feminine, less human, than it would be if her skin were peach pink rather than blush brown? A respected critic of poetry, however, once insisted that Gwendolyn Brooks would remain a minor poet as long as she continued to write about black people.

Since "relevance" is a relative term, I do not wish to have inferences drawn that I believe black students respond only to black materials. Nor am I suggesting that black materials be used only for the spiritual, moral education of white students. Instead, I wish to discuss a few problems related to the inclusion of the materials and to the teaching of black students.

First, the black experience. Despite my own use of the phrase, there is no single entity which can be identified as *the* black experience. One does not speak of *the* white experience. Why should blacks be presumed to be less capable of variation? Certainly, all blacks in America have shared a common experience in the sense that all have been made aware psychologically that restrictions imposed solely because of racial identity would prevent their ability to select homes, hold jobs, and discover opportunities equal to their talents. Aware that only one black is the president of a large university; that only one is a senator; that before 1945, no blacks competed on teams in the "major leagues" of organized professional sports — aware that the careful development of talent may lead not to the riches promised by the American dream but to a barred door, many blacks share a psychology of failure. Furthermore, many share a common awareness that their fortunes and lives have been subject — outside legal redress — to the whims of members of a different, frequently hostile race.

Despite such a commonness of experience, however, there are many individual variations upon that common theme. Let me illustrate by referring to two works which should be known by any English teacher who professes to be knowledgeable about American literature: *Native Son* by Richard Wright and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Both writers set their stories in the South Side of Chicago. Both wrote about male protagonists from working-class families which had migrated North from the South. Both protagonists are chauffeurs for wealthy whites. Both protagonists recognize society's restrictions and repressions. Yet the experiences and the psychologies of the Thomases in *Native Son* differ significantly from those of the Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Paule Marshall's story of the maturing of a young black girl in Brooklyn is not identical in theme or content with Louise Meriwether's story of another black girl in a Northern city. Ronald Fair's delineation of the psychological problems for a black youth seeking manhood in Chicago *(Hog Butcher)* is

different from Ernest Gaines' treatment of the maturing of a black child in Louisiana ("The Sky is Gray"). I have never heard any teacher contend that the American experience described by Edith Wharton is identical with the American experience described by Mark Twain. To focus on one or the other would cause omission of significant portions of "the American experience." Why then should a teacher presume that a single work by Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison or James Baldwin will reveal all that needs to be known about the experiences of black people?

Since I am revealing one of my biases, let me explain further. Regardless of the sentiment expressed by many teachers on all levels of academe, I do not believe that the *primary* function of a literature class is to help students learn about various nations and races. (Does anyone read *Huckleberry Finn* primarily to find out what Missouri youth are like?) I judge that attitude to be partly a defensive gesture by English teachers who, awed by the God of Practicality, seek to prove that the study of literature has as much utilitarian value as a study of chemistry or physics. Nevertheless, whatever purpose is made paramount for teaching literature, literature, by the very nature of its subject matter, will inform readers about human beings, about the emotions, needs, aspirations, psychology, and ambitions of people. Restricting the subject matter of a general literature class to one particular group of people or one particular race implies dangerously that all humanity can be defined by the behavior of that group. Is hunger not hunger if the starving are black? Is love not love if the lovers are black?

To discover such humanity in literature about the black experience, however, a teacher must expel the notion that "universality" is defined by the action of white characters of European ancestry. Black characters must not be viewed as a different species, but as people reacting to their individual circumstances. I cannot understand how any rational being can profess to find universality in Tennessee Williams' illusion-demented Southern belles or Faulkner's frustrated Mississippians, yet fail to find it in LeRoi Jones's dramas about black youths tormented and destroyed by the magnetism of European middle-class value systems. Can one find universality in Hemingway's story of revolutionaries in Spain but not in Black Arts writers' stories about black revolutionaries in America?

The teacher, furthermore, must avoid selection which enforces a distorted concept of the black experience. Although many blacks today live in inner cities in the North, not all do. Therefore, it is misleading to the white students in the class if the teacher chooses only literary materials which portray the black experience in inner cities in the North.

I must re-emphasize that I am not urging that the responsibility of a

literature class is to present a total picture of the black experience. Since that total picture cannot be presented, the teacher must emphasize that the work is art which reflects a black and a human reaction.

How does the teacher know that the presentation of black life is representative if the teacher is as unfamiliar with black people as the students are? I could argue that it is the teacher's responsibility to study history and sociology and psychology to sufficient depth that the teacher acquires a knowledge of the black experience. I could argue this, but I will not. I will say instead that this limitation of the teacher's knowledge is even greater reason for selecting works about blacks because the works represent American literature with black subjects rather than selecting works merely as sociological representations of black experience.

Even the selection of works as literature, however, poses problems for the teacher whose knowledge of black people is restricted to what has been read in the newspapers or heard over television. Rather than merely repeating ideas I have already published, let me suggest that you examine *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Literature by Afro-Americans,* which I co-authored with Barbara Stanford and published through NCTE.

A few ideas about selecting and evaluating material, however, deserve emphasis and repetition. Black literary works should not be restricted to autobiographies of current celebrities. Willie Mays, Sammy Davis, Jr., Hank Aaron, and Pearl Bailey are very talented individuals in their respective fields; but, as writers, they must be compared with Joe Namath and Joe DiMaggio, not with Henry James and William Faulkner. A teacher can motivate disinterested readers by providing access to such materials, but those works should not necessarily be the basis of classroom analysis. Furthermore, this kind of autobiography — even if written by Claude Brown, may be deleterious rather than beneficial. It reflects the popular rags-to-riches theme which, unfortunately, typifies neither the white nor the black experience in reality.

Second, as I have said before, one is not observing black humanity if one sees it only through the eyes of white authors. William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* is a notable example. The work tells quite a bit about the psychological delusions of a white author but very little about black people.

Third, and most important, one must approach the question of evaluation of black literature as carefully as one would approach a wrinkled green man sitting on a cigar-shaped object hovering several feet off the ground. What seems to be the familiar and normal may suddenly become the unknown.

It is patronizing to assume that black talent is so limited or so equal that a poem by a teen-aged black is necessarily as significant a literary achievement as a poem by a black who has been practicing his craft *for two* decades. On the other hand, black writers should be permitted to benefit from the generosity of criticism applied to whites.

Think of the apologias used to protect non-black authors. If Thomas Hardy seems aesthetically weak because he overuses coincidence, he must be respected for having a philosophy of life which presumed the inevitability of coincidence. If Charles Dickens seems melodramatic, he is praised for humor and for serious social commentary. (Is this not the same as the protest for which black writers are castigated?) If Henry James seems to say nothing significant about life, he is nonetheless venerated for the artistry with which he says nothing.

Use the same measure of approval for blacks — praise them for their virtues rather than focusing solely on their weaknesses. But do not give that approval consescendingly.

Let me re-emphasize my point. I am not suggesting that patronizing excuses be made for black writers — that they be praised merely because they have written a book that is condescending. What I am suggesting instead is a faithful adherence to the practices employed in the study of non-black writers. Despite their weaknesses, the Shakespeares, Miltons, Jameses, Eliots, and Faulkners are praised for their strengths. Each is worshipped even though he can be judged deficient morally, aesthetically, intellectually, or sociologically. Why then should a black writer be condemned if he is not superior according to all four of these criteria?

The subject-matter or theme may present a problem for the teacher — especially the high school teacher. For instance, consider Claude McKay's "If We Must Die."

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!

What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back![4]

How does one refute the charge of parents and school boards that the work is an inflammatory and racist polemic that will miseducate black students and will offend white students? Or is the poem to be considered universal in its appeals to dignity and manhood? Winston Churchill certainly considered it universally applicable to Anglo-Saxons when he quoted it to challenge Britons and Americans to oppose the Nazis. Would the universality have disappeared if Churchill had known that the poet was challenging black Americans to resist the massacres of blacks in American cities in 1919?

Similarly, if a writer develops a theme which reveals black people's despair because of oppression by white America, is the theme to be judged weak because this thought runs contrary to the optimism presumed to be an inherent and essential trait of American character? Or is the writer to be praised for realistically reflecting the psychological patterns of many black Americans? One would assume this to be almost a rhetorical question were it not for the fact that a white critic such as David Littlejohn criticizes black writers for giving major attention to oppression by whites — even though few would deny that oppression by whites is a major and continuing concern of most blacks. Phrasing the problem slightly differently, is the black writer to be demeaned because his black characters do not think as middle-class white Americans do? Is the work less reflective of life because the antagonist is not the force of Nature but the force of white society?

Black writers who have denounced the treatment of blacks in America are frequently identified as propagandists. The label identifies them as individuals who wish to persuade others to accept conclusions which are not supported by reason. But if a black American is judged unreasonable when he performs in ways considered reasonable for white Europeans (such as rebelling against oppression), can black writers ever hope to persuade white judges that black literary conclusions are based upon reason?

All of this seems to support the contention of Nick Ford, a black critic, that the major distinction between propaganda and art is the question of whether you agree or disagree with what is written. When all possible has been said about style, characterization, structure, and so forth, the fact still remains that Milton's Paradise poems and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, are propaganda pieces in the sense that they were contrived to manipulate readers emotionally to adopt a particular philosophical or social

view. How many ministers in New England engaged in adultery with members of their congregation? How many cuckolds are spiritually destroyed by desires for vengeance? Who knows? It's not important. Hawthorne told his story, and the literati continue to praise the credibility of the work. But, when one discusses Richard Wright's "Long Black Song," a story in which a white salesman seduces/rapes a black housewife, a segment of a class in literature is almost certain to object: "But that's sentimental and melodramatic. Most black housewives have not been raped or seduced by traveling salesmen." Propaganda need not be art (whatever that is), and art need not be propaganda; but propaganda and art may be interrelated in a literary work, which should not be rejected merely because it is written to express the views of members of a minority group.

Let me raise other problems involved in evaluating the thought of black writers. One question is, "How representative is the thought?" The logical response should be, "Who cares?" but many students refuse to accept that answer. I was asked recently whether *Invisible Man* was autobiographical. As a teacher, the questioner felt that she could not introduce the work to her students as a valid presentation of black life and black thought unless Ellison had experienced the incidents he recounted. Conventionally, I might have talked about the ability of a writer to project himself into a situation through imagination and about the fact that the question itself reflected the fallacious assumption that the only value derived from Afro-American literature is autobiographical commentary on society. My response was more simple. The mere fact that American society identifies Ellison as a Negro means that *Invisible Man* represents the attitude with which at least one Negro is willing to be identified publicly. How in the name of academe can white Americans presume that William Styron, a white Virginian, faithfully recreates the feelings of a black rebel who died a century before that white man was born, yet question the validity of a contemporary black man's presentation of the feelings of some contemporary black Americans?

There is too often a tendency to judge the work of black writers according to the respectability of their morality. Let me cite an example of the problem. A white college professor who has proposed an anthology of poetry by contemporary blacks says that he will select entries according to the moral quality of the work. Does that mean that he will automatically reject Black Revolutionary writers whose morality insists upon the destruction of the white establishment? Or does it mean that he will reject blacks who do not insist upon destruction? Does it mean that he will include only poems which approve the publicly professed morality of the middle-class American (Anglo-European)? Or will he include only poems which

honor the morality of the lower-class rural or ghetto dweller. For the high school teacher, the problem is intensified by the fact that many contemporary black writers treat social and moral issues unthinkable for those adults who refuse to admit that school children know about drugs, sexual intercourse, homosexuality, and crime. Furthermore, many black writers use language which school boards deny that school children know or can hear on the most respectable streets or in middle-class homes.

Such pressures, of course, can censor the desire of any teacher. Nevertheless, one can find usable materials in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Mari Evans or in the fiction of Ernest Gaines, James MacPherson, Eugenia Collier, Kristin Hunter, and Ronald Fair — to name only a few of the many good black contemporary writers.

Finally, teachers need to give attention to the question of a Black Aesthetic — that is, a basis for judgment derived from African-American culture rather than from European-American culture.

Until recently, few individuals questioned the validity of European-American literary standards as a basis for judging the quality of works by black writers. Critics and teachers assumed that all, or certainly most, Afro-American writers imitated the forms respected in Euro-American literature. However, as contemporary Black Arts writers are consciously modeling their work upon styles derived from Afro-American culture, a conscientious teacher must consider the need to examine Afro-American culture to understand the bases of some styles and language patterns. It is absurd to denounce a black poet as non-rhythmic because he fails to use iambic pentameter if he, like Langston Hughes, is following a jazz rhythm, or if he, like Don L. Lee, is imitating the melodies of John Coltrane. Of what value is the judgment that a novelist's language lacks the elegance of a Henry James or the complex syntax of a Faulkner if the black writer is imitating the terse retorts of the dozens, or the repetitiveness of the call-response chants of black churches, or the image-laden rhetoric of the sermon of a black minister?

Beauty — or an aesthetic — surely may have more than one form. Consider that African art was judged crude until Picasso improved European art by using African styles. Rather than judging a black writer as necessarily inferior because he does not use a European model, the teacher must acquire sufficient cultural breadth to be able to judge whether the black has created beauty according to a non-European model. (Note that beauty does not result merely from the use of a non-European model. A black may write inferior poetry in Black style just as easily as a white can write non-artistic poetry in traditional European style.)

Today, use of a Black Aesthetic as a criterion for evaluating style is

especially important, as many Black Arts poets are not only imitating rhythms familiar to black culture but are also emphasizing intonation, gesture, pantomime, and other devices which have been traditionally significant in singing and story-telling by black Americans, who developed their literature from oral traditions. In contrast, such devices seldom have been respected fully by teachers who favor poetry derived from traditions which stress written words. Literary work cannot be evaluated outside its own tradition. Certainly, one does not condemn an apple for not being a good orange.

What I have stated should not discourage a teacher from introducing black literature. Instead, my comments should enforce the fact that a teacher must study black literature as carefully as one would examine a work written by Will Shakespeare or Herman Melville.

You have been very patient on a sultry evening. Before I end, however, let me talk briefly about black students to underscore some things Jessie Wright said. There are blacks and there are blacks and there are blacks. The recitation is not merely an exercise in imitation of Gertrude Stein. As I have stated repeatedly, one black is not all blacks; but all blacks are human. One black student is not all black students, but all black students are human beings with human sensitivities. It is as reprehensible to presume that black students should be restricted to reading literature about blacks as it is to deny them the opportunity to study that literature. Some black students will be annoyed when an excess of black literature is presented — particularly if it is assumed that they are incapable of understanding non-black literature, or if the subject is a contemporary black who has committed an act judged to be criminal and the black student is expected to be a defense attorney for a white-student jury. Let me explain this with a digression. A few years ago, I knew that if I talked with a white group, sooner or later someone would ask what I thought about the Panthers or Rap Brown or Angela Davis — whether I did not think that they were creating unfavorable images for black people. I do not believe that my questioners would have even understood what I was talking about if I had asked them whether they thought Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew were making matters difficult for whites — whether Agnew was a discredit to Greek people. My unconsciously racist questioners would not even have considered the possibilities that groups other than whites could or should be judging human behavior. They would have known that their own behavior and character could not be adduced from the behavior and character of a Nixon, an Agnew, a Raskolnikov, a Sister Carrie. Yet such false inferences are drawn daily about blacks and black students.

My favorite example comes from Ann Arbor, Michigan, where a black librarian was studying for a Ph.D. while on leave from the college where she worked. Because her husband was studying for a medical degree, he remained in the Southern town where they had their home while she took the children with her. During the first year of her study, her oldest son brought home a report card on which the teacher had written that the child was having difficulty with schoolwork because he came from a "broken home." When the mother told me the story, her anger had subsided into the ironic amusement blacks can manifest towards the asininities of supposedly intelligent white folks. Neither one of us needed to ponder the teacher's faulty syllogism: Black boy; therefore, slow student. Black boy from the South; therefore, even slower student. No father in the home (so the teacher learned from the boy, who did not bother to explain the history of his family); therefore, a broken home. So, in the same state where a teacher told Malcolm that blacks could not become lawyers; in the same state where a white high school counsellor had tried to dissuade a black student from accepting a scholarship at the University of Michigan on grounds that blacks could not meet the standards of that univeraity; in that state of Michigan, a white teacher in 1970 clucked her tongue sympathetically and dismissed as disadvantaged and unteachable a black child from a family whose level of education and standard of living probably exceeded those of the teacher.

Teachers must regard black students as individuals with individual needs and abilities. Some students will need preparation for college; some will not. Some will like literature; some will not. It is sinful for the teacher to assess judgment according to skin color, then abdicate responsibilities for teaching. Black students, like white students, can be lazy. In fact, many may seem lazier; for often nothing in their experience suggests a correspondence between energy exerted in school and the promise of a good life. Northern blacks frequently may have less motivation to perform well in school than even the average Southern black, who is still taught by parents that education represents a means to a better life. If the black student lacks motivation, the good teacher must assume responsibility for generating motivation rather than assume that the student's indifference is evidence of his racial inferiority.

As I stated at the beginning, rather than presenting a scholarly thesis, I wished merely to talk with you about issues which I consider significant to anyone who considers the relationship of black literature and black students to the English classroom. In a sense, I have used your time unfairly. Had I chosen, I think I might have answered the question implied in the printed title (The Black Experience: Its Relevance to Our Children") merely by reading "For My People" by Margaret Walker (Alexander), a black poet,

who is now chairman of the English Department at Jackson College, Mississippi.

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking and playhouse and concert and store and hair and Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn to know the reasons why and the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when, in memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different and nobody cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and play and drink their wine and religion and success, to marry their playmates and bear children and then die of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something — something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied and shackled and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies, associations and councils and committees and conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches, preyed on by facile force of state and fad and

novelty, by false prophet and holy believer;
For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations;
Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.[5]

Ladies and gentlemen, that is Black literature. That is American literature. That *is* relevant.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Frank M. Davis, "Roosevelt Smith," *Black Insights*, Nick A. Ford, ed.(Waltham, Mass.: Ginn, 1971). Copyright by Frank Marshall Davis.

[2]Gwendolyn Brooks, "Kitchenette Building," *Selected Poems* by Gwendolyn Brooks (New York: Harper, 1963). Copyright 1963 by Gwendolyn Brooks Blakely.

[3]Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Ballad of Late Annie," *Selected Poems* by Gwendolyn Brooks (New York: Harper, 1963). Copyright 1963 by Gwendolyn Brooks Blakely.

[4]Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," *Harlem Shadows* by Claude McKay (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922). Copyright 1922 by Harcourt, Brace & Company.

[5]Margaret Walker (Alexander), "For My People," *For My People* by Margaret Walker Alexander (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942). Copyright © 1942 by Yale University Press.

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MY BLACKNESS

My Blackness
Is electrifying
As I pour
Myself in you
Lighting even
The darkest
Corners of
Your forgotten soul.

—Lawrence Johnson

BACK PAGES: A COLUMN OF BOOK REVIEWS

by Paul B. Janeczko
Masconomet Regional High School

THE FRIENDS, Rosa Guy, Bantam, 185 pp.

As the title suggests, this is a novel about friendship. But more than that, it is a story of self-discovery. Phyllisia Cathy is fourteen and has just moved to New York City from the West Indies. Because she is an intelligent child, she is often the victim of the cruelty of her schoolmates. She desperately needs a friend. Edith Jackson is determined to be that friend even though she is initially snubbed by Phyllisia because of her shabby appearance. As their friendship finally takes root, Phyl must come to grips with a dying mother and a tyrannical father who is always threatening to send the young girl back to "the island." As the novel builds to its dramatic conclusion, Phyllisia learns more about herself and the sacredness of friendship.

THE FRIENDS was a *Library Journal* Best Book of 1973 as well as a *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year.

J.T., Jane Wagner, Dell Yearling, 124 pp.

To the other Black kids on the block, J.T. Gramble was the one who stole the transistor radio out of the red convertible before they could get it. His mother and his teacher are bewildered by his often irresponsible behavior. Things change, however, when the ten-year-old befriends an old, one-eyed, badly hurt alley cat. J.T. takes on a new dimension as he lavishes all the love he is unable to express to people around him on "Bones," the battered cat he has found in the junk-filled vacant lot.

J.T. was originally a ballad and then an award-winning TV play on C.B.S.'s "Children's Hour." This easy-to-read paperback contains vivid photographs taken by Gordon Parks, Jr., during the production of the play.

A HERO AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A SANDWICH, Alice Childress, Avon, 127 pp.

Benjie Johnson is thirteen, Black, and well on the way to being hooked on heroin. But this novel isn't just Benjie's story. It is also the story of those who are affected by Benjie's problem: his stepfather, his mother, his grandmother, and his teachers. Since each section of the novel is written from the point of view of different characters, there is some rough language. But don't let that stop you from reading and sharing this stunning novel that tells of life in Harlem. As you read about Benjie, you will find yourself rooting for this boy to overcome his problem and grow in the love of his newly-acquired "father." This is a fine novel of life and love.

A HERO AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A SANDWICH was a *Library Journal* Best Book of 1973 as well as a *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year.

THREE SONGS OF FREEDOM

by Lawrence Johnson

Jubilee
Their Eyes Were Watching God
To Be Young Gifted and Black

The Black woman has been a pillar of support not only in the Black Experience, but also in the white experience of American life. Her strength flows like a mighty river, running deep into our very souls. Her effects branch out like tributaries in all directions, sometimes flooding our banks with an unnerving force, oft times soothing us with its searing beauty.

The world of literature has been so touched by the hand of the Black woman. *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker, (Bantam); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, (Fawcett World); and *To Be Young Gifted And Black* by Lorraine Hansberry, (New American Library), are but three examples of the grandeur, scope and natural beauty of the Black woman in literature.

Jubilee, Ms. Walker's magnificent Civil War novel, brings a new dimension to an area of American literature that has been the breeding pit of rather crude stereotypes of Black characters in American fiction. *Jubilee* is the story of a people and specifically a woman, Vyry, who faces defeat daily in every possible way, but is never defeated. The story of Vyry, conceived, born and reared in slavery, triumphs on a universal level because it transcends being just a story of Black survival and struggle, but is a story of the spirit that beats against the bars and would be free, regardless of the bondage. It took Ms. Walker some twenty years to complete *Jubilee,* based on a true story from her grandmother. It is a long novel, but it is as rich as the good black earth from which it was born.

Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* was written in 1937 and thankfully brought back into circulation again in 1965. Although this book may be unfamiliar to many, it is a classic of Black literature. On its most basic level, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a love story between the heroine Janie and life. But as with Ms. Walker, Ms. Hurston's novel seaps down to that secret thing screaming in many of us to

come forth. From a different time and angle this too is a novel of freedom — freedom to break loose from society's walls and be! Janie has gone through two marriages when Tea Cake comes into her life and unlocks her soul and teaches her what love is and what life is. Near the end of the book, Janie speaks of love. "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore." Unlike *Jubilee*, this is a short novel — but how it sings! The last paragraph of the novel has to be one of the finest examples of imagery and poetry in American literature.

Their Eyes Were Watching God comes and goes quickly; but the beauty lingers on, and you keep going back for bits and pieces to carry you through the dry spells. Call in your soul to come and see.

Lorraine Hansberry is best remembered for her play about an American family, "A Raisin in the Sun." *To Be Young Gifted and Black* is a collection of her writings that covers the brief time she shared the earth with us. *To Be Young Gifted and Black* is the black experience of Lorraine Hansberry, the woman. It brings us in touch with her from the Southside of Chicago to her bed of cancer. Through her sensitive writing we are drawn through and into the black psyche of a woman filled with an overwhelming desire to live. It is this rage of life, this desire to reach out and touch all people, that makes her death at the age of thirty-four so very tragic. The book opens with an introduction entitled, "Sweet Lorraine," by James Baldwin; and immediately you know you are about to embark on an unusual voyage into life.

Ms. Hansberry's last public speech was to the United Negro College Fund Writing Contest. In this brief, yet movingly powerful speech, she seems to sum up what she herself has been trying to do, and asking these young writers to carry on, for her time has grown short. She speaks of despair, life, and love. These are not just Black topics, but human topics. And so from another perspective we see a struggle for freedom. From Vyry in *Jubilee* to Lorraine Hansberry we see the story and hear the songs of freedom. Leontyne Price once said of singer Aretha Franklin: "There is an Aretha Franklin in all of screaming to come out." The Black women in literature help to bring this scream out and bring us release and relief and somewhat closer to that thing within us we call our soul. Lorraine Hansberry wrote:

> And so the sun will pass away — die away.
> Tones of blue — of deep quiet — lovely blue —
> float down and all the people's voices seem to grow
> quiet — quiet.
> And I remember all the twilights I have ever known
> they float across my eyes.
> I think of forests and picnics — of being very warm
> in something cotton. Of smelling the earth — and loving
> life.
> Long live good life! And beauty . . . and love!

GROWING UP BLACK

by Lee E. Allen

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou
My Main Mother, Barry Beckham

Joy, freedom, suffering, laughter and beauty are not Black or White. They are in the experience of all men who search for their own meaning. For some inexplicable reason there must be intense pain before there can be awareness, before there can be an understanding of the past and control of the future.

The Black Experience, as captured by Maya Angelou, in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Bantam) and Barry Beckham, in his novel, *My Main Mother* (Signet) is for everyman but especially for those who want to learn about growing up, with everything against you. These are books of joy because they show the extent of human strength and dignity. They are not happy books, however, because growing up Black (or White) is painful.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a moving and beautiful song of Maya Angelou's early life in a small, rural community where racism is a way of life, and her relationships with a wise but distant mother; an affectionate but totally irresponsible father; her bright and sensitive brother; her "Momma" (grandmother) who gave her the strength to live, the courage to prevail and the quiet power of dignity.

"Black, beautiful, man of many words, genius, hero of sorts," Mitchell Mibbs, Barry Beckham's central character, narrator and hero, fights against impossible odds in *My Main Mother.* Mitchell's father is merely a ghost of the past; his mother is selfish and cruel; he has no close friends except for his dog and his Uncle Melvin, who gives Mitchell love and strength. Mitchell fits no easy stereotypes. From a small town in Maine, he journeys to Harlem, the Village and to Brown University. Although this is a tragic and moving first novel, there is a sense that there is meaning in his great struggle of life.

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